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978-1-107-04744-0 - Yoruba Art and Language: Seeking the African in African Art

Rowland Abiodun

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YORUBA ART AND LANGUAGE

The Yorùbá was one of the most important civilizations of sub-Saharan Africa. While the high quality and range of its artistic and material production have long been recognized, the art of the Yorùbá has been judged primarily according to the standards and principles of Western aesthetics. In this book, which merges the methods of art history, archaeology, and anthropology, Rowland Abiodun offers new insights into Yoruba art and material culture by examining them within the context of the civilization's cultural norms and values and, above all, the Yoruba language. He begins by establishing the importance of the concepts of *oriki*, the verbal and visual performances that animate ritual and domestic objects, such as cloth, sculpture, and dance; and *àṣẹ*, the energy that structures existence and that transforms and controls the physical world. Both concepts served as the guiding principles of Yoruba artistic production. Through analyses of representative objects, Abiodun demonstrates how material culture expresses the key philosophical notions at the heart of the Yoruba worldview. Abiodun draws on his fluency and prodigious knowledge of Yoruba culture and language to dramatically enrich our understanding of Yoruba civilization and its arts. The book includes a companion website with audio clips of the Yoruba language, helping the reader better grasp the integral connection between art and language in Yoruba culture.

Rowland Abiodun is John C. Newton Professor of Art, the History of Art, and Black Studies at Amherst College, Amherst, Massachusetts. He is the author of *What Follows Six Is More than Seven: Understanding African Art* (1995); co-author of *Yoruba: Nine Centuries of African Art and Thought* (1989), *Yoruba Art and Aesthetics* (1991), and *Cloth Only Wears to Shreds: Yoruba Textiles and Photographs from the Beier Collection* (2004); and co-editor of *The Yoruba Artist: New Theoretical Perspectives on African Arts* (1994). Abiodun was a consultant for, and participant in, the Smithsonian World Film *Kindred Spirits: Contemporary Nigerian Art*. A former member and chair of the Herskovits Book Award Committee of the African Studies Association, Abiodun has also served on the board of directors of the African Studies Association and as the president of the arts council of the African Studies Association. He chaired the executive board of the Five College African Scholars Program, Amherst, Massachusetts, and has been interviewed by the BBC World Service on the art of Africa. In 2011, he received the Leadership Award of the Arts Council of the African Studies Association in recognition of his excellence, innovative contributions, and vision in the fields of African and Diasporic Arts.

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*For Lea, Báyò, Àìná, Wólé,
and
My larger Inódulàghò family*

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Acknowledgments

The ideas in this book had their genesis in Ọ̀wọ̀, my birthplace, and especially in the traditional education I received from my grandparents: Soló (hunter and farmer) and Ọ̀lákòlì Abiodun (a traditional midwife); parents: Adéṣẹ̀jù and Àjọkẹ̀ Abiodun; grand-uncle: Ọ̀lógán Ọ̀gúnlẹ̀yẹ of Ù̀ṣẹ̀lú (famous blacksmith and carver of *àkó*, second burial effigies in Ọ̀wọ̀); uncle Chief Akénùwà of Ù̀gbóròkò quarter, an expert in the history and political culture of Ọ̀wọ̀; Aunt Yeye Déké (a practitioner of the ẹ̀rindínlógún divination system); Aunt Yeye Oko (traditional cloth weaver and herbalist); Aunt Dérénlúkò (traditional cloth weaver and *ṣòkòróghò* music expert); and Aunt Adéyọriọ́lá Ọ̀jọmọ, nee Abiodun (Olori Ọ̀jọmọ Adédámọ́lá Arúlíwọ̀ II of Ìjẹ̀bú-Ọ̀wọ̀, historian, expert in traditional procedures and *oríkì* performance). I am also indebted to Ọ̀jọmọ Kólápọ̀ Àmàká II and Ọ̀jọmọ Adédámọ́lá Arúlíwọ̀ II, of Ìjẹ̀bú-Ọ̀wọ̀; and Ọ̀lówọ̀ Ọ̀látẹ̀rù Ọ̀lágbẹ̀gí II and Ọ̀lówọ̀ Ọ̀gúnoyẹ̀ II, of Ọ̀wọ̀, for always welcoming me to their palaces to attend important rites and ceremonies. Chief Ojọ Elerèwè, a meticulous cataloger of history and events in Ọ̀wọ̀, was also always ready to share with me his profound knowledge of Ọ̀wọ̀ culture. To all of them, I am very thankful for my early exposure to, and education in, Yoruba art and culture.

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At the University of Toronto, I was most fortunate to study under Professor Joan Vastokas, who was not only a brilliant scholar and

exemplary teacher but also a researcher whose interests and methodology in the study of non-Western art gave me the confidence and intellectual tools to pursue my passion in Yoruba art. It is hard to imagine writing a book like this one without her guidance and the “never give up” attitude she instilled in all her students.

Getting the opportunity to teach and do research at the University of Ifè (now *Ọ̀bafẹ́mi Awolọ̀wọ* University), Ilé-Ifè, was invaluable as it was an ideal environment for young scholars in all respects in the 1970s. The creative and intellectual energy of my colleagues – Professors Solomon I. Wangboje, J. R. O. Ojo, and Babatunde Lawal – was infectious. Required to attend and give seminar papers on one’s ongoing research before senior colleagues – not only from one’s home department but also those from other departments – was initially intimidating. But before long, I benefited from the insights and expertise of scholars like Ulli Beier, Michael Crowder, Robin Horton, Olúbí Ọ̀dipọ̀, and Arthur Ọ̀kúníḡà, who were not doing what I was doing but were very interested in my work. My next-door neighbor, Peter Garlake, shared his excitement and thoughts with me when he excavated Ọ̀balára’s land. In the African Studies building complex, which housed African Languages and Literatures, Music, Theater, and Archaeology, I met and interacted with Professors Wándé Abimbólá, Akínwùmí Ọ̀ṣọ̀lá, Akin Euba, Túnjí Vidal, Sam Akpabot, Wọ̀lé Ọ̀yínká, Ọ̀lá Rótímí, Ọ̀lábíyí Yáì, Ọ̀lásopé Oyèláràn, Stephen Akíntoyè (director of the Institute of African Studies), Fátúmbí Verger, Ọ̀mótọ̀ṣọ̀ Elúyẹ́mí, and Bádé Àjùwọ̀n to mention only a few. My interactions with these colleagues led to my teaching courses in some of their own disciplines. Thus, in one year, I taught a course on Yoruba art entirely in the Yoruba language, in the department of African languages and literatures, and in another year, I co-taught Aesthetics in Drama with Wọ̀lé Ọ̀yínká. And for several years I participated in a collaborative Yoruba research project, which included mainly professors from the history department, namely, Professors Adéagbo Akínjógbìn, Ọ̀ṣẹ́gun Ọ̀ṣọ̀bà, Stephen Arífàlò, Stephen Akíntóyè, and Fẹ́mí Ọ̀mọ̀sini – all of whom contributed immensely to my approach to studying Yoruba art and culture. I must also mention here my intellectual indebtedness to scholars like Professors Akínṣọ̀lá Akiwọ̀wọ̀, Moses Mákíndé, Fẹ́mí Morákinyò, and Barry Hallen who were always eager to discuss new ideas and directions in Yoruba studies. In fact, the idea of launching the now discontinued *Journal of Cultures and Ideas (JCI)* (of which I was a founding member)

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was intended to carry our conversations to a level where scholars, practitioners, and Yoruba intellectuals could contribute to topics of common interest. The Aláà Study Circle, as the founders of the *JCI* called themselves, invited the well-known Ifá priest, Adémákinwá, Òdikùn of Oṅdó; herbalist, David Adéníjí of Ìwò; and Chief Akínbíyì Akìwọ̀wọ̀, a cultural historian, to lead seminars in their respective areas of expertise at the university. I owe these Yoruba intellectuals a debt of gratitude.

The ancient city of Ifẹ̀, with its numerous festivals, rites, and ceremonies, was a constant reminder that learning must extend beyond the walls of the university. There, I had new mentors and extremely knowledgeable people who introduced me to Ifẹ̀ history and culture. I am especially grateful to the late Ọ̀ba Adésọ̀jí Adérẹ̀mí, the Ooni of Ifẹ̀; Chief M. A. Fábùnmi, the Ọ̀ḍòlè Atọ̀báṣe of Ifẹ̀; and Chief M. O. Fásọ̀gbọ̀n, Loókò Àdùmílà of Ifẹ̀ for always welcoming me and answering all the questions I asked them to the best of their knowledge. This pattern of my learning outside the academy was replicated in every Yoruba town and community where I conducted research on Yoruba art and culture. To all the ọ̀ba, chiefs, elders, priests, and priestesses (too numerous to mention here), I am profoundly grateful for sharing their knowledge with me.

The preparation of this manuscript for publication has benefited immensely from the comments and criticisms of many colleagues and friends in and outside the discipline of African art studies. Among them are Albert Mosley, Adélékè Adé̀kọ̀, John Pemberton III, Ọ̀mọ̀niyì Afọ̀lábí, José Celso Castro Alves, Doran Ross, Mei-Mei Sanford, Olúwọ̀lé Fámúlẹ̀, Robert Fox, Victor Manfredi, Jacob Olúpọ̀nà, Ọ̀lásopé Oyèláràn, Joel Upton, Natasha Staller, Olúfẹ̀mi Vaughan, Allen Roberts and Polly Nooter Roberts, Bọ̀laji Campbell, Jeffrey Ferguson, Kólá Abímbólá, Henry John Drewal, David Newbury, Miriam Goheen, Robert Farris Thompson, Paula Ben-Amos Girshick, Ramona Austin, Barry Hallen, Nkiru Nzegwu, and Joan Vastokas.

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Acknowledgments

(Ayòbòlá) West for helping with the diacritical tonal marks on Yoruba words and texts. I am also grateful to Georgina Beier who gave me the idea of including an online recording to introduce recited *oríkì* to those unfamiliar with the genre and for granting me permission to use passages from Ulli Beier's *Yorùbá Poetry*.

Finally, I thank the University of Ifè and Amherst College for funding most of my research. Without their financial support and generous leave time, it would have been very difficult for me to complete this book.

Orthography and Phonological Notes

We adopt the current practice in Yoruba orthography for purposes of transcription. For rendering the dialectal materials, however, the following conventions have been adopted (SY = Standard Yorùbá):

Orthographic Symbol	Phonetic Context
(a) gh : òghò	ʎ: ò (SY : òwò)
èghen	ɲ: èɲe (SY: èǰí)
(b) ṣ èṣù	tʃ: èt fù (SY : è fù)

With reference to the second symbol, common Yorùbá [ʃ] corresponds everywhere to Ọwò Yorùbá [ts]. For the rest, we have largely ignored the vowel harmony requirement for lax [u] and [ɪ] in places, since we do not pretend to make a strictly phonetic transcription. For more on orthography and phonology of Yoruba words in the text, listen to the online audio for samples of recited *oríkì* in Standard Yorùbá, and the Èkìtì and Ọwò dialects.

Yoruba Language and Selected Readings of Yoruba *oríkì* on online audio

I have benefited immensely from Ulli Beier's important work on Yoruba poetry and Ọlásopé Oyèláràn's research and insights on Yoruba *oríkì*. Also, I want to thank Georgina Beier who first suggested that I include the online audio with this book.

Yorùbá is a tonal language. That is, each word has to be pronounced with its proper tone pattern, since tone is as much a property of the vowel as any phonetic feature of each sound unit. Thus, each syllable or vowel that actualizes the syllable can have a high (H), mid (M), or low

(L) tone. The current common orthography conventionally indicates the high (H) with the rightward ascending acute accent marker “/”; it leaves the mid (M) unmarked, and marks the low (L) with left to right descending marker “\” over the vowel, as in (1):

- 1a. rí (H) – to see
- b. ri (M) – to sob inconsolably
- c. rì (L) – to submerge

A complex syllable has a sequence of two or more phonetically identical or phonetically disparate vowels, where the vowels in each sequence may bear the same tone register or different tone registers, as in (2):

- 2a. fẹ́ẹ́ (H H) – imperceptible breath
- b. féú (H H) – quality of being clean cut, as severing with a sharp razor or blade
- c. rẹ̀ú (L H) – in a slovenly manner

In a tone language such as Yorùbá, a change in tone register may produce a “nonce” or a non-occurring form, or even a word with a totally different meaning and function, as in (3):

- 3a. ìkó (L M) – a rap on the temple with bare knuckles
- b. ìko (L M) – raffia fiber
- c. iko (M M) – a nonce, non-occurring form

Words with two or more syllables but with phonetically identical sound units become different words with a change of a tone register, as in (4a), (4b), (4c), and (4d):

- 4a(i) kókó (H H) – a knot
- (ii) kókò (H L) – cocoyam
- (iii) kòkó (L H) – cocoa (bean, pod, or tree)
- 4b(i) ìlú (L H) – a town
- (ii) Ìlù (L L) – a drum
- (iii) Ìlu (L M) – gimlet
- 4c(i) àgbọ̀n (L L) – the chin
- (ii) àgbọ̀n (L M) – coconut
- (iii) agbọ̀n (M H) – wasp
- (iv) agbọ̀n (M L) – basket
- (v) àgbọ̀n-ọ̀n (L H L) – the heat of pepper
- 4d(i) ọ̀kọ (M M) – husband
- (ii) ọ̀kọ́ (M H) – a hoe
- (iii) ọ̀kọ̀ (M L) – a vehicle
- (iv) ọ̀kọ̀ (L L) – a spear

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Phonoesthetic words present particular problems to translators who must wrestle with how to convey the subtle variance of meaning with which the language endows minuscule change of tonal melody of each speech event. Items in (5) illustrate this:

- 5a. kólókóló (H H H H) – stealthily
- b. kólòkòlò (H L L M) – circuitously
- c. kòlòkóló (L L H H) – without transparency, muddy
- d. kòlòkòlò (L L L L) – fox; characterized by guile

Language surrogates, such as the drum and whistling, replicate the pitch pattern or the perceived tonal melody of speech events. Such replications present one-to-many mapping between a given melody and plausible speech events in a tone language. When, therefore, the ace drummer beats out the English signature tune of the Nigerian Broadcasting Service: “This is the Nigerian Broadcasting Service,” the Yoruba mother-tongue monolingual is struck by the approximation of Nigerian English-speaker tonal melody of the tune: H H L L H H M H H M L as could be hummed with the following:

- 6a. dúdú dùdù dúdú, dudúdú dudù
H H L L H H M H H M L
- b. Bólúbàdàn bá kú, tani ó joyè?

When the Olúbàdàn (Ruler of Ìbàdàn) dies, who will be his successor?

Other versions were

- c. Ó jògèdè dúdú, inú ñta bọ̀n ùn
He ate unripe banana, and now he has belly trouble.
- d. Kò sólòsì níbí, lọ sílé kejì
There’s no good-for-nothing person here; go to the next house.

The only way to attempt to render Yoruba poetry properly in English would probably be to set it to music, although the English equivalent words would not have the same number of syllables and so the tonal patterns could not be reproduced exactly. It would be virtually impossible to re-create the effect of statements like

- 7a. Olójú orógbó ó ó
He who has eyes like bitter kola nuts

Or

- b. Ojúmọ́ mọ́, nkò gbọ́ poro, poro odó
I did not hear the sound of a mortar in the morning.¹

Note the high, mid, and low tones in the following Ifá verse for Òrìṣàńlá (same as Ọ̀bàtálá) – the tonal counterpoints represented by the creative deployment of

- 8a. dúdú (H H)
 b. pupa (M M)
 c. funfun (M M)
 d. Òrìṣàńlá d'áró męta
 Ó dá kan ní dúdú
 Ó dá kan ní pupa
 Ó dá kan ní funfun
 Dúdú ni o rę mí
 O ò gbọdọ rę mí ní pupa
 Dúdú ni o rę mí
 O ò gbọdọ rę mí ní funfun
 Ìwà mi ni o kọ tètè rę
 Ní kùtùkùtù Ọ̀bariṣà
 Òrìṣàńlá prepared three dyes
- He made one black²
 He made one red³
 He made one white⁴
 Make me black
 Do not make me red
 Make me black
 Do not make me white
 Dye me with my ìwà first
 At the dawn of creation⁵

Oríkì is the fundamental epistemological building block of basic form of Yoruba poetic discourse. We deploy it for accounts of all objects of consciousness, and of our worldview. Nothing is exempt from it; kings, gods, towns, animals, and plants. Thus, “The young bride who rubbed her body with camwood” is one of the oríkì of cassava; “cassava and maize are your poor relations” is one of the oríkì of yam. The oríkì of Europeans is “a pair of shorts that can worry a large embroidered gown.” Oríkì are frequently recited on the drum. They are sung or recited by the akéwi,⁶ the citation performers at a king’s court. Similarly, the oríkì of an òrìṣà (Yoruba deity) would be sung or recited by his or her worshippers; and that of an animal or plant by hunters.⁷

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A short oríkì of Ọ̀ṣun:

9. Ọ̀ṣun, Ẹ̀ṣẹ̀ṣẹ̀sí
 Olóòyà iyùn
 Adagbadebu Onímọ̀lẹ̀ odò
 Elétùtù Èdìbò Èkò
 obìnrin gbádámú, obìnrin gbàdàmù
 Obìnrin tí kò ẹ̀ é gbá lẹ̀gbẹ̀ mú

Ọ̀ṣun, embodiment of grace and beauty
 The preeminent hair-plaiter with the coral-beaded comb
 Powerful controller of the estuary
 Propitiator-in-chief of Èkó (the City of Lagos)
 A corpulent woman
 Whose waist two arms cannot encompass⁸

The following incantation is for ẹ̀rọ̀, a psycho-medicinal “softening” agent to eliminate friction and tension, reduce heat, and improve the lot of an unfortunate person. Note the inclusion of water and fan – both of which allude to Ọ̀ṣun’s power.

10. Bí oorù bá mú
 Abẹ̀bẹ̀ ní í bẹ̀cẹ̀
 Bí iná bá n̄ jò koko
 Omi là á fi í pa à
 Ọ̀gẹ̀rẹ̀, iná mà n̄ lé omi lọ
 Ọ̀gẹ̀rẹ̀
 Bí iná bá n̄ lé omi
 Tí kò padà lẹ̀yìn omi
 ẹ̀rọ̀ pẹ̀tẹ̀
 Ọ̀gẹ̀rẹ̀, iná mà n̄ lé omi lọ
 Ẹ̀ṣẹ̀ṣẹ̀
 Iná kò gbọ̀dò le ẹ̀ṣẹ̀ṣẹ̀
 Kó le wọ̀ nù odò

When the weather is blazing hot
 It is the fan that pacifies it
 When there is a flare-up
 We use water to quench it
 Defiantly, fire chases water
 Sweeping past
 If fire chases water
 And does not turn back,
 Propitiation is the answer

Sweeping past, fire is chasing water
 Even with all its flare
 Fire does not chase its glow
 Into the river⁹

The following is an excerpt from the *oríkì* of Ọlọwẹ̀ of Ìsẹ̀, who is widely acclaimed as the finest Yoruba sculptor of the twentieth century. It is rendered in Èkìtì dialect:

11. Ọlọwẹ̀, ọkọ mi káre
 Àṣẹrí Àgbàlìjù
 Elémòṣó
 Ajuru Agada
 Ó sun ọ tẹgbẹtẹgbẹ
 Elégbẹ bí ọní sàá
 Ó p'ùrókò bí ọní p'ugbá
 Ó m'éo ròkò dáun ẹ
 Mà a sìn o, Ọlọwẹ̀
 Ọlọwẹ̀ kẹ ẹ p'ùrókó
 Ọlọwẹ̀ kẹ e sọnà
 Ó lọ ulé Ògògà
 Ọdún méréin ló ẹ líbẹ
 Ó sọnò un
 Kú o bá tí dé'lé Ògògà
 Kú o bá tí d'ọwọ
 Uṣẹ ọkọ mi ẹ ẹ líbẹ
 Kú o bá tí dé'Kàrẹ
 Uṣẹ ọkọ mi í líbẹ
 Kú o bá tí d'Ígèdè
 Uṣẹ ọkọ mi ẹ ẹ líbẹ
 Kú o bá tí dé Ùkítí
 Uṣẹ ọkọ mi í líbẹ
 Kú o lí Ọlọwẹ̀ l'ògbàgì
 L'Úsẹ
 Uṣẹ ọkọ mi í líbẹ
 Ulé Déjì
 Ọkọ mi sùṣẹ líbẹ l'Ákùrẹ
 Ọlọwẹ̀ sùṣẹ l'Ọgòtún
 Ikiniún

 Kọn ọn gbé lọ silú Òyibó
 Ọwọ rẹ ló mú ẹ
 Ọlọwẹ̀, my excellent husband
 Outstanding in war

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Emissary of the king
 One with a mighty sword
 Handsome among his friends
 Outstanding among his peers
 One who carves the hard ìròkò tree as though it were as soft as a calabash
 One who achieves fame with the proceeds of his carving
 I shall always adore you, Ọlówẹ̀
 Ọlówẹ̀, who carves ìròkò wood
 The master carver
 He went to the palace of Ọ̀gògà
 And spent four years there
 He was carving there
 If you visit the Ọ̀gògà's palace
 And the one at Ọ̀wọ̀
 The work of my husband is there
 If you go to Ìkàré
 The work of my husband is there
 Pay a visit to Ìgèdè
 You will find my husband's work there
 The same thing at Ùkítí
 His work is there
 Mention Ọlówẹ̀'s name at Ọ̀gbàgì
 In Ùsẹ̀ too
 My husband's work can be found
 In Déjì's palace
 My husband worked at Àkúré
 My husband worked at Ọ̀gòtun
 There was a carved lion
 That was taken to England
 With his hands, he made it.¹⁰

The following oríkì could be recited or sung in the context of àkó, second burial ceremony in Ọ̀wọ̀, rendered in Ọ̀wọ̀ dialect:

12. Ọ̀nà ọ̀là má gbé bà mi gwò o
 Kórí bá san mí
 Ọ̀nà ọ̀là má gbé yè mi gwò o
 Káyé bá san mí
 Ọ̀ma lá jọma rẹ̀ o
 Ọ̀ma lá jọma
 Ọ̀ma yọ ọ̀ mótítà okùn rọrí bí
 Ọ̀ma lá jọma
 Tọ̀lá, tọ̀lá, ọ̀ mẹn rójògun o

È e è e

Tọlá, tọlá, ọ mẹn rí bà mi o

Olúdà iràmẹ̀n o

Bàbá o

Ọ̀rọ̀nnaiyé o

Wà á ná ire

Wà á bérò tólí o

Olúdà iràmẹ̀n

Èlélé malúwayé

Má mà yóko lígbòjojò

Má á mà mọ̀sẹ̀ peninẹ̀

Má'şọ ọ̀lọ̀nà perùkú o

Ayé bà rẹ̀ ó rẹ̀ mi

Agada mí mí yè rẹ̀kùn èjẹ̀

Ùròghò ọ̀là

Bà mi lé şùle o

Ọ̀ma'wótòn, wó'sìn Ọ̀ghò

Ùròghò ọ̀là, bà mi lé şùle o

I will carry my father through the path of honor

If I am fortunate enough

I will do my mother great honor

If I reach a position of honor in life

This is a child born different

Some children are born different from others

This is a child born into royalty and great wealth

People always honor the hero

È-é-è-é

People always honored my father

The possessor of the great sword

My father

Ọ̀rọ̀nnaiyé o

May you be fortunate

May your fortunes last

You, who have the great sword,

Greetings, child of Olúwaiyé

Do not go to the farm when it is raining

Do not let the grass wet your feet with early morning dew

Wear your most costly attire to travel on the dusty road

I admire your father's life which was perfect

The sharp sword that draws blood

The one of great fame

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My father is the great one being celebrated
A popular man of Ọ̀wọ̀

Great men of Ọ̀wọ̀

My father is the great one being celebrated¹¹ (R. Abiodun, 1976)

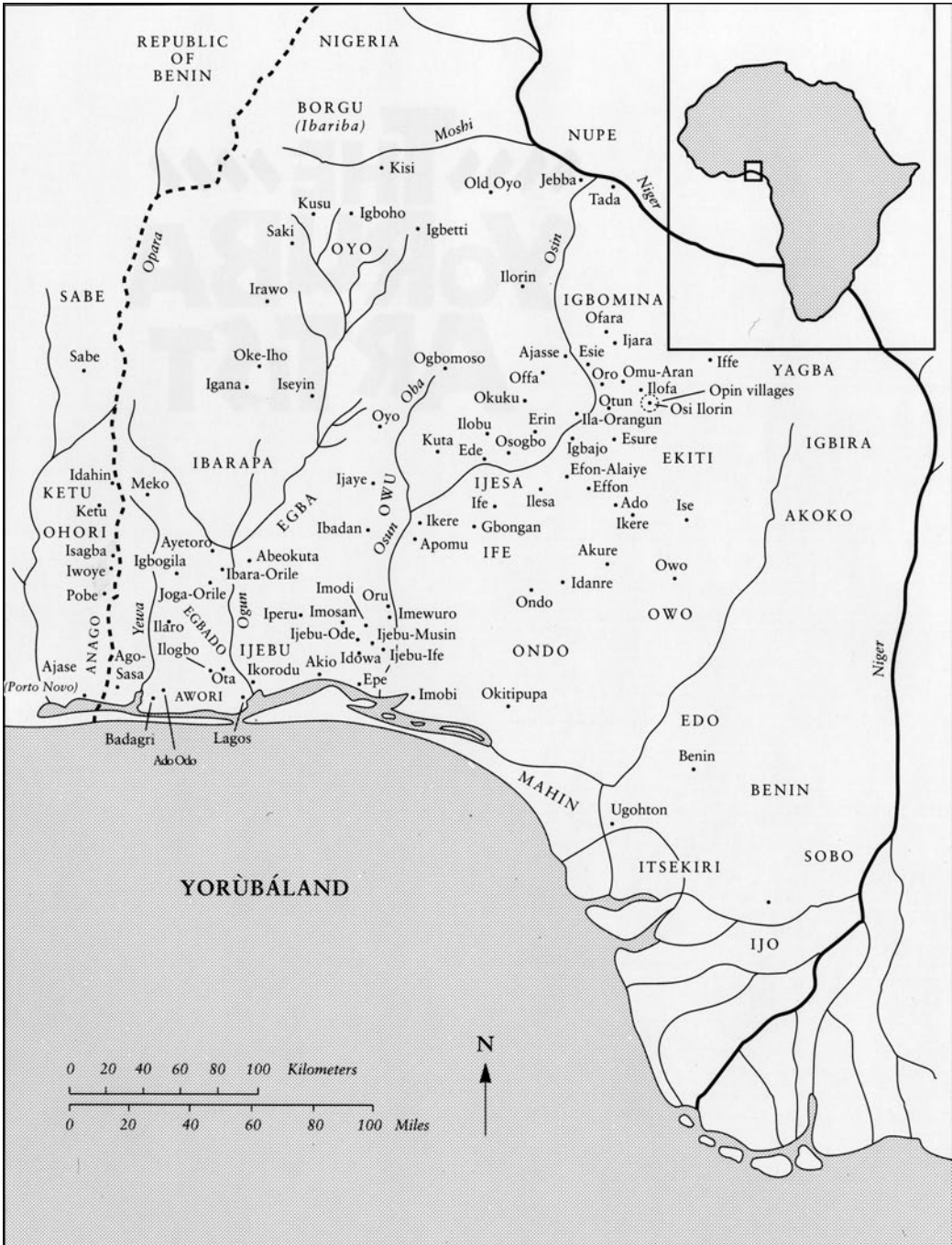
The following greeting is typically reserved for a Yoruba ọ̀ba (sovereign).

Note that the ọ̀ba is addressed as both father and mother:

13. Kábíyèsí
Aláṣẹ
Èkejì òrìṣà
Ikú
Bàbá-Yẹ̀yẹ̀

One whose authority cannot be challenged
Who is endowed with àṣẹ
And ranks only with the òrìṣà
Death, the embodiment of finality
Ultimate Father-Mother¹²

The companion website (www.cambridge.org/9781107047440) contains audio clips of the Yoruba language to help the reader better grasp the integral connection between art and language in Yoruba culture.



Map of Yorùbáland